



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Asian Elephant Conservation Fund



The Asian elephant, seen in zoos and circuses throughout the world, is more familiar to the average U.S. citizen than its African cousin. Nevertheless, in the wild, this species is more endangered. Only 35,000 to 45,000 Asian elephants survive in the wild, while African elephants, also threatened, are 10 times more numerous.



The Asian elephant shares a land mass with some of the largest human populations in the world, fragmenting elephant habitat and populations. It is believed there are only 10 Asian elephant populations in the 13 range countries (India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, China, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia) that contain more than 1,000 elephants. Half of these are in India. Most other remaining populations are small (less than 100 individuals).



A growing threat is increased poaching of Asian elephants. Generally, Asian elephants have not been as threatened by poaching as African elephants. Females are tuskless, and only 60 percent of the males have tusks. However, recent trends in India indicate that ivory trade, which had declined to minimal levels by 1990, revived in the mid 1990s. A shortage of elephant population and law enforcement monitoring data from most range countries makes it difficult to estimate poaching levels.



In 1997, Congress passed the Asian Elephant Conservation Act, establishing the Asian Elephant Conservation Fund (Fund), to address the varied problems facing this species. The Fund provides assistance through a competitive grants program designed to develop projects with government and non-governmental

organizations, local communities, academic institutions, and other interested parties to increase their ability to manage Asian elephant habitats, support surveys and monitoring, educate local communities, and increase anti-poaching efforts. During the 4-year period ending in 2002, the Service received 160 proposals and awarded 65 grants totaling \$3,027,050. This effort leveraged close to a 1:1 match from partner organizations.

The following paragraphs summarize significant challenges to Asian elephant conservation and provide examples of contributions made by the Fund.

Habitat loss is the single greatest threat to the survival of substantial numbers of wild Asian elephants. The geographic range of the Asian elephant has declined approximately 70 percent since the 1960s. In Sumatra, Indonesia, and the State of Assam, India, unsustainable logging, an expanding agricultural frontier, recession, civil unrest, and human immigration have fueled rampant habitat loss impacting 8,000 elephants in both countries. Habitat loss results in greater elephant-human conflict, characterized by increased elephant deaths by poisoning, shooting, and electrocution. In Sumatra, problem elephants are captured and domesticated.

To combat habitat loss, the Fund has supported habitat protection and management work in 10 Asian elephant range states. In Assam, the Fund supported construction of anti-poaching camps in wildlife sanctuaries and reserve forests to halt illegal encroachment, while in Sumatra, Sabah Malaysia, and Cambodia, the Fund supported development and

implementation of land use planning to develop core protected areas surrounded by “elephant friendly” buffer zones. In addition, the Fund supported elephant corridors at key sites in Thailand, India, and Nepal.

Human-elephant conflict (HEC) over crops is the chief cause of human-induced elephant deaths. For example, in Assam, residents recently poisoned 31 elephants as retribution for crop raiding. In Sri Lanka, home to 3,000 elephants, approximately 120 elephants are killed annually while crop raiding. The Fund supports 14 projects—3 projects in Sri Lanka—that address HEC. The first project fences villagers and their crops in and the elephant range out. In a companion project, engineers are developing techniques to detect elephant movement toward cropfields in order to deter them before they enter and damage crops. Yet a third strategy, undertaken outside of Sri Lanka’s Yala National Park, develops ecotourism opportunities based on elephant viewing as alternate income for farmers.

Poaching continues to threaten Asian elephants in some parts of their range. Cambodia has more than 8,000 square miles of elephant range. However, 30 years of unregulated hunting have reduced the population to 300 animals. In some parts of southern India, centuries of ivory poaching has produced a skewed

ratio of 50 adult female elephants to every adult male. In response to such threats, the Fund supported on-the-ground anti-poaching work in 6 Asian elephant range states, including the development and implementation of a protection and monitoring program in 3 key elephant ranges in Cambodia. In southern India the Fund supported anti-poaching training, equipment for ranger staff, construction of anti-poaching camps, and assistance to increase prison sentences for elephant poachers.

In addition to working with partners to address threats, the Fund contributed to the assessment of elephant population size, and to applied research into the distribution, seasonal movements, and habitat use patterns of elephant populations at 11 sites in South and Southeast Asia. For example, such projects in Cambodia supported national surveys of all elephant ranges and set the stage for ongoing protection and park-establishment projects. Likewise, applied research to improve elephant population survey techniques and examine aspects of Asian elephant conservation genetics helped provide information managers needed to prioritize on-the-ground conservation actions in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Almost all projects supported by the Fund have training components. Many also accomplish conservation education

and outreach. A training project for the forest field staff of elephant reserves in Tamil Nadu, India, enhanced the applied technical skills of 100 state forest rangers. Another project supplied more than 1,600 teachers with Asian elephant conservation education materials developed with Fund support. The Fund has supported the World Conservation Union’s development of a range-wide Asian Elephant Conservation Action Plan, as well as National Action Plans for Bangladesh and Cambodia.

The Service invites submission of grant proposals for the conservation of the Asian elephant throughout its range, and supports projects that develop local ability to protect, manage, conserve, or conduct applied research on the species and its habitats. Please contact the Service at the address below for further information on the Asian Elephant Conservation Fund.

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